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Even Though He Slay Me

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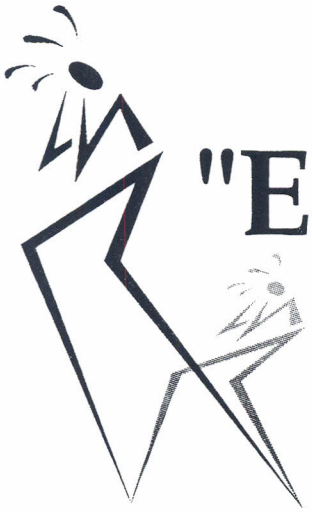

"Even Though He Slay Me"

By Mike Cope

Faith is holding onto uncertainties with passionate convictions.

—Soren Kierkegaard

Real faith cannot be reduced to spiritual bromides and merchandised in success stories. It is refined in the fires and storms of pain.

—Eugene Peterson

Since my ten-year-old daughter died on November 21, 1994, other grieving parents have been my ministers. Often they have been my counselors; a few times they have been my life support system, breathing for me while I was intubated.

One of the families with us when Megan died had lost a son several years earlier. They and two other families from our small covenant group spent a day riding the elevator between the third and fourth floors of the hospital, between Pedi-ICU and Labor and Delivery. One child was born into our covenant group just as another died. Torn between joy and sorrow, they marveled at the words of Ecclesiastes: "There's a time to be born and a time to die." We just didn't know it would be the same time!

A week after her death, I was supposed to join twenty other ministers for a retreat in Colorado. When I told my wife that I would, of course, cancel the trip, she told me that she had "a sense that I was supposed to go." (She's learned to use language like that so her rationalist husband doesn't get nervous!) So with much fear about being alone in my black hole of grief, I went on for two days. Was it just a coincidence that three of the twenty men who were there had also lost children? Their words, their hugs, their prayers, their silence—all were healing balm.

I haven't actually met all the grieving parents who have ministered to me. For example, I've bonded in the past eighteen months with John Claypool, a good friend whom I've never met. We've spent time together as I've lingered again and again over passages from *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, a collection of sermons he preached during and after his daughter's battle with leukemia. These words could be mine:

Please do not expect any great homiletical masterpiece. Do not look for any tightly reasoned, original creation. Rather, see me . . . as your burdened and broken brother, limping back into the family circle to tell you something of what I learned out there in the darkness. The first thing I have to share may surprise you a bit, but I must in all honesty confess it: I have found no answers to the deepest questions of this experience.

Another conversation partner has been Nicolas Wolterstorff, whose brusque pieces in *Lament for a Son* are both honest and faith-filled. "The wounds of Christ are his identity," he writes. Jesus didn't have his nail marks removed when he was raised. Instead, they remained to convince some that he was the Crucified One. God raises us from our deepest grief, too, Wolterstorff observes, but he doesn't remove the wounds. "If you want to know who I

am, put your hands in." If you don't feel the scars on my heart from my daughter's death, you don't really know me!

I must mention one older, grieving father who has surfaced above all others as a friend and guide in this dark journey. I first met one of his daughters, Keren Happuch, who told me I could probably profit from spending a day with him.

When we met, I saw on this aged man an ear-to-ear smile that invited me to come nearer. But grieving parents sometimes develop a clearer vision that can look more deeply, and as I drew closer I could see the scars in his eyes from deep loss—to say nothing of literal scars all over his body, forewarning me that his pain had taken several forms.

Like others who have lost precious kids, Keren's father knew the first question to ask: "What was her name?" (For some reason, it's very important to me that people know, not just that I had a daughter, but that her name was Megan.)

"Megan," I said with my heart in my throat.

My eyes moistened when he asked me to share some memories. "Well, if you tested intelligence, you'd say she was mentally retarded. But if you could test unconditional love and joy, you'd say she was gifted and talented. Just depends on what you test!" I forced a tiny grin.

I told of her crooked smile; of how she liked to sit at the dinner table with one of her legs draped over one of mine; of how she loved to smell my face when the aftershave had just been splashed on; of how she would kiss my bald spot; of her expertise at snatching people's glasses before they knew what was happening; of her love for the Lamb Chops video (instrument of parental torture!); and of her favorite song in the world, "I'm in the Lord's Army."

When he asked about "the dark hole," I told him about the time several months ago when Diane and I left our boys for a week with my mother. When we returned, she told us that any time the three year old wanted to cry he went into Megan's room, sat on her bed, and sobbed. He had learned that we have our own wailing wall.

Finally, our conversation shifted. I asked about his wounds. He told me about a devastating financial reversal but quickly added, "That was nothing." Then he described all the physical pain he had endured. But the worst—by far!—was the death of his children. This man had lost ten kids: seven sons and three daughters.

At this point, I realized that his story sounded familiar. When I asked his name, he said, "Job."

"The Job?" I wanted to know. "As in, man-of-great-patience Job?"

He guffawed and replied, "People kept telling me that some famous writer had called me patient. That hardly seemed to describe me. When I started checking the sources, it seems that he called me steadfast. That fits better than patient!"

"What was it like?" I whispered, as if in a sanctuary.

"I wanted to die," Job said. "I assumed even death would be better than living and bearing all the pain." He still remembered some of his cry of anguish:

Obliterate the day I was born.
Blank out the night I was conceived!
Let it be a black hole in space.
May God above forget it ever happened.
Erase it from the books!
May the day of my birth be buried in deep
darkness,
shrouded by the fog,
swallowed by the night.
And the night of my conception—the devil take it!
Rip the date off the calendar,
delete it from the almanac.
Oh, turn that night into pure nothingness—
no sounds of pleasure from that night, ever!

To some, that kind of outcry sounds ridiculous. But it didn't to me. Two weeks before I met Job, I passed out in my doctor's office (probably just from flu and dehydration, as it turned out). But when I woke up, I was hooked up to a machine that was running an EKG. Being something of a medical expert (since my wife and I watch "E. R." every week), I knew he was afraid I was having a heart attack. My first thought was glorious: "I may see Megan today!"

Then I asked Job how his community of faith had responded. How helpful were his closest friends? A smirk crossed his face as he asked if I had yet noticed that "sufferers attract fixers the way road-kills attract vultures."

"At first they were wonderful," he remembered, shaking his head. "They crawled down into my dark hole with me and just sat there, silent. . . . It was when they opened their mouths that everything went downhill. It was just so clean, so obvious to them. They had everything figured out. They must have memorized the book of Deuteronomy just

to preach to me! They had a religious cliché for everything to prove that my suffering was somehow my fault."

Ah, the clichés, I nodded knowingly. Like the great bumper sticker that asks, "If you don't feel close to God, guess who moved!" Job's friends couldn't have put it more succinctly.

I thought of another religious cliché that was on several cards that had been mailed to us. Ron Rosenbaum referred to it last year in the *New York Times Magazine* in a piece called "Evil's Back." (He didn't mention when it had left.) He traveled to a lake in the Carolinas where a young mom had sent her Mazda to a liquid grave with her two little boys in it. Rosenbaum stood at the lake, wondering how any human could do that. Then he noticed a shrine off to the side, full of memories for the boys. One poem he saw infuriated him—the one that kept popping up on cards we received after Megan died. He exploded:

Job's response reminded me of how people who read Proverbs all the time make me nervous. Their world tends to be too airtight!

The gist of the poem was this: God looked around heaven one day and found it a bit dreary. He thought the place could use some floral accents to brighten it up. So he looked down at earth and saw two lovely little "rosebuds" he fancied—the unblemished souls of Susan Smith's two boys. He liked the look of them so much he had to pluck them for his own garden. That is—although the poem doesn't make this explicit—kill them and install them in heaven to perk the place up. It is meant to be an image of sugary piety: the little boys are with God in his beautiful abode because he loved them so much; he took them because the innocence of their souls was so precious and beautiful to him. . . . It's meant to be consoling, but in fact it's one of the most terrifying depictions of the deity I can imagine.

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Next I asked Job if he had found scripture to be comforting. "Well, . . ." he stalled. "I don't guess I'd choose the word comforting."

He recalled meditating on Psalm 8, on how God is always mindful of us. He said he decided that if that was what it was like for God to pay attention to him, he'd prefer to be ignored, thank you very much! He remembered parodying the psalm:

What are mortals anyway, that you bother with them,
that you even give them the time of day?
That you check up on them every morning,
looking in on them to see how they're doing?
Let up on me, will you?
Can't you even let me spit in peace?
Even suppose I'd sinned—how would that hurt you?
You're responsible for every human being.
Don't you have better things to do than pick on me?
Why make a federal case out of me?

Mainly, though, Job said he reacted against people taking one slice of scripture to prove that everyone who is in pain is paying for something wrong they've done. "I believe in the law of retribution, too," Job said, "but it doesn't seem like men and women are in much of a position to know exactly when it applies!" He tried to recall his attempts to punch holes in the absolute application of the law of retribution:

Why do the wicked have it so good,
live to a ripe old age and get rich?
They get to see their children succeed,
get to watch and enjoy their grandchildren.
Their homes are peaceful and free from fear;
they never experience God's disciplining rod.
Their bulls breed with great vigor
and their cows calve without fail.
They send their children out to play
and watch them frolic like spring lambs.
They make music with fiddles and flutes,
have good times singing and dancing.
They have a long life on easy street,
and die painlessly in their sleep.

"What choice did I have but to complain to God?" Job wanted to know. He refused his wife's cynicism ("Curse

God and die!") and his friends' clichés. Instead, he had decided that since he was a believer, the only action he could take with integrity was to take his complaint to the top. "It seemed like profound faithlessness not to speak about my pain," he said.

Complain to God? I had to think about that for a while, but then I realized that in my own feeble, fearful ways I had done the same thing. I just hadn't talked very openly about it. People tend to be scandalized, as if God can't handle it. I remembered the lament prayer one of my elders, John Willis, had led in our church's assembly the Sunday after Megan died. A few were highly critical; they couldn't believe that someone had complained to God. We tried to explain delicately that every word in John's prayer was from the Psalms, but . . .

Suddenly the deep truth of Job's actions hit me: his response of lament and pain was offered out of the deepest sort of faith. He had seen the unfairness and brokenness of this world and was still going before God's throne for answers. Walter Brueggemann's words came to mind:

> [Lament-speech] requires deep faith, but not only deep—it requires faith of a new kind. It takes not only nerve but a fresh hunch about this God. The hunch is that this God does not want to be an unchallenged structure, but one who can be frontally addressed. Such is the hope and yearning of lamenting Israel.

"Ummm, what happened when you complained to God?" I asked Job.

"Well, believe it or not, God spoke back to me."

Since he didn't offer any more information, I leaned forward and asked the obvious question: "What did God say?"

"Another day," he promised. "An old man has given all he can in one day. I'll tell you later. But hear this carefully: God is good—mysteriously good."

After we embraced, Keren led her father back to his room. I was left to ponder the powerful witness I had seen and heard.

I realized that Job's story hadn't been so much about suffering—which is what I'd expected—but about faith. Deep faith. Down-in-the-dark-pit faith. God-trust lived out in the midst of real disappointment.

My friend Job had lost possessions, health, and children. Others I know face career failure, floundering marriages, struggles with sexual orientation, rebellious children, and divorce. But his life seemed to open up for all of us the possibility of trusting God when nothing works the way it's "supposed to."

While I admit that the way Job was in God's face still makes me nervous, I think God must have been able to deal with it. For all of Job's complaints, all of his cries, all of his questions were lifted up to God in faith. He took his case to this sovereign, mysterious God, not because he was an unbeliever, but because he was a man of faith.

Don't ever let go, I thought to myself. Remember Job's anchoring cry of faith: "Even though he slay me, yet will I hope in him."

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